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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001000

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: NON-PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION SPLINTERING

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary/Comment: The non-parliamentary opposition has long consisted of a disparate group of individuals with divergent and often contradictory aims. Despite their obvious tactical disagreements and often mutual disdain among the leaders, they were able to remain united for nearly two months around two principles: they greed that forcing Saakashvili to resign in the short term would be in their political interests; and they agreed that unity among the group gave them significant leverage and that no block or faction was strong enough on its own to force Saakashvili to resign. Forcing Saakashvili's resignation was always a long shot, and many appear to be reassessing the utility of continuing to pursue this goal seven weeks into protests. Time has exacerbated the deep divisions within the group. The situation remains fluid, but a split has appeared between those non-parliamentary leaders who want to secure and protect their political future (Alasania - National Forum members) and those who feel that the protests are their last best chance (Burjanadze - Zourabichvili - Gamkrelidze) at political relevance. A number of fence sitters such as Levan Gachechiladze, David Uspashvili (Republicans) and Zviad Dzidziguri/Kakha Kukava (Conservatives) still appear undecided as to whether to salvage their political futures or gamble that more provocative actions can still bring about regime change. It important to note that these groups are highly fluid and subject to constant change. End
Summary/Comment.

The Radicals

¶2. (C) Burjanadze, Beselia, Zourabichvili, Koba Davitashvili, probably David Gamkrelidze and a number of lesser figures comprise this highly radicalized group that believes in using the streets to make changes in government. The group believes that continuing the ongoing protests is their last, best chance at true political relevance in Georgia and they have gambled everything on these protests. Burjanadze, Zourabichvili and to some extent Gamkrelidze, appear to have little incentive to wait until 2010 for bi-elections or 2012 for parliamentary elections when the highest payoff would be a seat in Parliament or perhaps Mayor of Tbilisi. Gamkrelidze declined his parliamentary mandate in 2008, and it is unlikely that former Foreign Minister Zourabichvili, or former Speaker Burjanadze have any interest in waiting a year or three to be an opposition back bencher in Parliament. Their popularity is minuscule in any event.

¶3. (C) With little incentive to compromise, the continued pursuit of Saakashvili's resignation makes political sense for them, despite the odds. Burjanadze, Zourabichvili, and Gamkrelidze seem to be making the calculus that more radical actions such as blocking highways, airports, or railroads will provoke a GoG overreaction that could galvanize the Georgian public to rally to their support and back their demand for Saakashvili's resignation. In their calculations, while probably the longest of long-shots, if they are seen as the leaders of a massive public uprising to overthrow

Saakashvili, they could be swept into power. Even among the radicals there is division. Beselia and Davitashvili represent the most radical of leaders of very minor parties for whom protesting appears to be an end in itself. They have not expressed interest beyond the revolutionary option. The question remains if the Dead-Enders have enough personal popularity and financial resources to keep the protests going without the moderates in large enough numbers to engage in the actions they have promised.

The My-Political-Future-Is-Ahead-of-Me Crowd

14. (C) Irakli Alasania and the National Forum comprise the more strategic and cautious group and will possibly include others when the dust settles. Alasania has long flirted with breaking from the radicals; recognizing that Saakashvili's resignation is essentially off the table, he appears poised to go his own way. As respected pollster Jeremy Rosner told the Ambassador, it appears that Alasania found the "sweet spot" in these protests. To the public, by joining in the protests, Alasania managed to establish his credentials as a serious opposition, but in his outreach to the government, he has portrayed himself as a moderate focused on dialogue. After much delay and only after it appeared unlikely that these protests might short-circuit the process and sweep him into power, Alasania and his team approached the International Republican Institute (IRI) for assistance in setting up an independent political party (Embassy Note: IRI has agreed and has tentatively set up a 3-4 day workshop for early June. End Note.)

15. (C) Alasania publicly stated that he would not support

TBILISI 00001000 002 OF 003

"crippling" the country by blocking roads, airports, or railways and has outlined an alternative plan agreeing to talks with the GoG without preconditions. Although Alasania said his public disagreement with Gamkrelidze on tactics would not split the Alliance (the Alliance is led by Alasania, Gamkrelidze and Uspashvili) clearly their interests are diverging. David Uspashvili (Alliance - Republicans) confirmed that Gamkrelidze and Alasania were on very different paths and even said he and Alasania were diverging. Alasania never held much sway within the non-parliamentary opposition, but appears to be moving closer to a natural political space appealing to moderate, centrist voters. Nevertheless, Alasania has been careful not to rhetorically distance himself too much from the rest of the non-parliamentary opposition.

16. (C) The National Forum led by Kahka Shartava (a former Georgian diplomat who worked in Embassy Moscow 1996-2000 and son of Zhiuli Shartava, chairman of the Abkhaz Council of Ministers who was executed by the Abkhaz militia in 1993), includes former members of the Traditionalists Union Irakli Melashvili (sometime politician and businessman) and Gubaz Sanikidze (well known historian like his father). The National Forum was established in late 2006 and played a minor role in politics until the recent protests during which its profile has grown considerably. The National Forum's policy agenda is not well established other than preferring a parliamentary republic and having a strong patriotic/nationalist leaning. Shartava and Sanikidze are both well spoken, have impressive biographies and seem to have filled a niche of being staunchly anti-Saakashvili while not appearing to be rank political opportunists. Shartava and company are relative moderates and have significantly nuanced their tone in recent weeks. The National Forum, which Alasania has called a potential partner, ordered its supporters to leave the cell city and has stopped protesting. Sanikidze said that the National Forum would focus on building support in the provinces. Like Alasania, National Forum leaders have been careful about distancing themselves from their non-parliamentary allies, but appear more focused on consolidating their gains in popularity rather than

forcing Saakashvili's immediate resignation.

On the Fence - Waiting for the Wind to Blow

¶7. (C) Opposition figures like Levan Gachechiladze, Usupashvili, Dzidziguri, and Kukava seem to be waiting for the dust to clear, although Gachechiladze and Usupashvili appear to be more in line with Alasania while Dzidziguri and Kukava with the radicals. Gachechiladze's political agenda, as always, is opaque. Like Burjanadze and Zourabichvili, Gachechiladze appears primarily interested in his own political gain. Gachechiladze has shown no interest in leading a political party nor being a number two in another. Ever the political opportunist, Gachechiladze probably prefers to ride the fence and recalculate his fortunes at a later date. On May 26, after the Patriarch's statements, Gachechiladze struck a moderate, measured tone, but did not rule out further protests. He was notably absent from the protest on May 27. However, after the second statement from the Patriarchate, Gachechiladze reappeared on stage and criticized the West for "indifference."

¶8. (C) Usupashvili seems to be at a personal crossroads, unlikely to achieve higher office on his own, but seems unwilling to accept a reduced role in another party or coalition. More a constitutional policy wonk than a traditional politician, Usupashvili is personally less radical than his colleagues with whom he has found common cause. Nonetheless, Usupashvili still appears torn between pursuing radical aims or playing a longer political game, likely in some sort of coalition with Alasania. Dzidziguri and Kukava also are balancing their natural instincts towards radicalism and an escalation of protests versus their equally strong desire to remain politically relevant. Whichever way they turn, apart from possibly Gachechiladze, the fence-sitters are poised to remain lesser, more complementary players rather than leaders.

Never Really In - Not Really Noticed Out

¶9. (C) Koka Gamsakhurdia (Freedom Party), George Maisashvili (Party of the Future), Guguli Magradze (Women's Party) and Akaki Asantiani (Traditionalists) who formed the Alliance of Freedom announced their split with the non-parliamentary opposition on May 26. Admitting they had only a nominal role in the decision-making process, the Alliance for Freedom said it would proceed according to its own plans. A number of other marginal political leaders have taken part in the protests at times, but have not played a key role. Shalva Natelashvili (Labor) finds himself in a

TBILISI 00001000 003 OF 003

familiar position, being in the unaligned opposition. Natelashvili appeared at the initial April 9 rally then chose not to participate further. He surprised the crowd (and organizers) by showing up at the May 26 rally to a enthusiastic response, probably swelling the number of people in the crowd with his own supporters, but other non-parliamentary leaders did not allow him to address the crowd. Natelashvili's Labor party continues to play its own unique role in Georgia political life always hovering around 4-7 percent support while the Alliance of Freedom and other small parties have much less popular support and are poised to play only a very marginal role in Georgian politics.
TEFFT